

The Fenians in Canada

David A. Wilson, University of Toronto

With some conspicuous exceptions, Canadian historians have traditionally regarded Fenianism as an external threat, and have generally focused their attention on the relationship between the Fenian raids and Canadian Confederation. What this perspective misses is the much more interesting issue of the Fenian movement within Canada and its connection to those American Fenians who wanted to emancipate Canadians from British imperialism -- or to invade the country, depending on your viewpoint. The subject raises fundamental questions about the political views of Irish Catholics in Canada, the dynamics of ethno-religious conflict, the development of Canada's secret police force, and the response of the state to an ethnic revolutionary minority whose most militant members were prepared to use various forms of physical force to achieve their ends.

In considering the connection between external invasion and internal subversion, it is important to realize that the Fenian general, "Fighting Tom" Sweeny, did not base his strategy on the prospect of mass Irish Canadian support. He seems to have been singularly unimpressed with the boasts of Michael Murphy, the Head Centre of the Fenians in Canada, that over 100,000 men were ready to rise against the Canadian government during the winter of 1865-66. Instead, Sweeny planned to rely on highly selective operations and local risings that would undermine the defence of Canada. Small groups of Canadian Fenians would cut the telegraph lines, destroy the railway bridge that connected Canada West and Canada East, infiltrate the Canadian militia, bribe British soldiers, and burn down government buildings. To coordinate activities, Sweeny established his own "secret service corps in Canada." From the Welland Canal to the city of Québec, Irish Canadian Fenian agents such as Patrick McAndrew and Richard Slattery swore in members and prepared the ground for the impending invasion.

These men were very much a minority in Irish Catholic Canada. Even in the core centres of Toronto and Montréal, the combined number of sworn Fenians was less than a thousand in 1865-66 -- just under 5% of the Irish Catholic population in both cities. In Canada as a whole, it is unlikely that they had more than 3,000 members, out of an Irish-Catholic ethnic population of over 250,000. This is in marked contrast to the Orange Order, which had 50,000 members in Canada West alone. And those Fenians who actively supported the invasion strategy were almost certainly a minority of a minority. It would seem, then, that they were of marginal importance, and that the Fenian scare was exaggerated to the point of paranoia.

However, the figures are quite misleading, for at least four reasons. First, they ignore the fact that beyond the number of sworn Fenians there were many fellow travelers who sympathized with physical force republicanism. There were still others who supported the Fenian objective of a separate Irish republic, but rejected the means of violence. Moreover, many constitutional nationalists had ambivalent feelings about the Fenians, believing that their hearts were in the right place even if their actions were misguided. The Fenians in Montréal reckoned that they could draw on the support of a quarter of the

city's Irish-born population, and their success in taking over the St. Patrick's Society shows that they were probably right. Similarly, the role of the Fenians in organizing St. Patrick's Day parades in places like Toronto, Ottawa and the city of Québec indicates that they could and did attract wider support.

Second, from 1863 the Fenians were able to reach a wider Canadian audience through their newspapers. From Toronto, Patrick Boyle's *The Irish Canadian* officially denied any Fenian connections while disseminating the Fenian message throughout the country. From New York, Patrick Meehan's *The Irish American* circulated in Canada; one of its Canadian distributors was Patrick James Whelan, the man who was hanged for the murder of Thomas D'Arcy McGee. And from Dublin, James Stephens' *The Irish People* reached Canadian readers. When the Dublin police raided the offices of *The Irish People* in September 1865, one of the first things they found was a list of subscribers from the city of Québec, and another from Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Third, although the number of sworn Canadian Fenians was small, they were a pervasive presence throughout Irish Catholic Canada. There were Fenian circles in all the major urban areas, where there was the critical mass for political organization -- not only in the cities, but also in towns such as St. Catharines, Brockville and Guelph, which one newspaper reporter described as "the central point for Fenian operations in Ontario."¹ The base of support came from the artisan, skilled and semi-skilled classes, shading off to unskilled labourers at one end of the spectrum, and small manufacturers, merchants and professional men at the other. But there were also Fenians in rural townships such as Adjala and Puslinch. In the township of Aberfoyle, described as "Little Ireland," the activities of energetic individuals -- most notably the farmer Peter Mahon -- seem to have been an important factor; in Adjala, support for the Fenians reflected and reinforced severe Irish Protestant-Catholic tensions in the area.

All these Fenian circles were part of a wider North American network, and this brings us to the fourth and in some respects the most important point: The fact that the Canadian Fenians operated in the context of a much more powerful American organization gave them an influence out of all proportion to their numbers, particularly in the context of planned and actual invasions in the late 1860s. There was, in short, a large discrepancy between the numerical and political significance of the Fenians in Canada in the mid-1860s. This helps to explain why McGee could dismiss them as a contemptible minority, yet simultaneously treat them as a major source of danger to the Canadian state and to his vision of Canadian nationality.

There is no doubt that some Irish Canadians brought their revolutionary politics with them as they crossed the Atlantic. A few, such as Timothy Warren Anglin, successfully concealed their revolutionary past, while others carried on the tradition. Patrick James Whelan, the alleged assassin of D'Arcy McGee, came from a Fenian family, and reportedly told a fellow prisoner that he had served 18 months for Fenianism in the west of England. His brother Joseph owned a Dublin pub that functioned as a meeting place;

¹ [Toronto] *Globe*, May 6, 1868.

he swore Irish soldiers into the Fenian movement, and was arrested and convicted for participating in the Fenian Rising of 1867. Among other things, he apparently said that “the Fenians should have murdered every one who did not assist them particularly the magistrates and others in authority,” and that “he had it on good authority” that England “would be met, and if possible driven out of Canada” in the summer of 1867.² Joseph Whelan wound up serving eight months in prison, and was released on condition that he leave for America; he ended up in Montréal, attending his brother’s trial. “What a fine family my mother had, what a fine lot of boys!” Patrick James Whelan supposedly said in his Ottawa cell. “One thing, they were fond of Ireland. One was shot at the firing of the police barracks, one is in prison for the same, and I’m here.”³

Other Irish Catholic Canadians became radicalized by the cycle of ethno-religious conflict in mid-19th-century Canada -- something that has been seriously underestimated by historians of Irish Canada, including myself. There were many local variations. In Niagara, for example, Catholics and Protestants apparently got on well together, while in places such as St. Thomas, Alma and Guelph there were severe sectarian tensions. This was particularly true in Toronto, where the birth of Fenianism can be traced back to the murder of Mathew Sheedy and the attack on the National Hotel on St. Patrick’s Day, 1858. The Orange police force failed to identify any Protestant rioters, and the wall of Protestant silence was such that the Police Magistrate, George Gurnett (himself an Orangeman), complained in his report that “other obligations” had prevented witnesses from telling everything they knew. There was no need to spell it out; everyone knew what he meant. It was in this context that Michael Murphy established the Hibernian Benevolent Society, a combination social club, sports club and benefit club that organized Irish Catholics against Orangeism on the streets of Toronto and developed into a Fenian front organization.

Given the Fenians’ use of front organizations, the way they sometimes concealed revolutionary intentions under the cloak of loyalty, the clandestine activities of a militant minority, and the recurring threat of invasion, the Canadian government faced a serious set of security challenges. A Canadian secret police service had been established in early 1865, in reaction to the activities of Confederates on the Canada-U.S. border. From the autumn of 1865, it was expanded, and its focus shifted exclusively to the Fenians. Spies attempted to infiltrate the Fenian movement, with mixed results, and informers supplied the government with tips that varied greatly in quality; there were so many informers supplying so much information that it was difficult to separate fact from fantasy. To supplement their activities, mail was routinely intercepted and read at the border, and the government sent freelance spies down to the Fenian headquarters in New York. The British consulates in New York, Buffalo, Boston and Philadelphia were also rich sources of information. Indeed, there were so many shady Fenian informers paying nocturnal visits to the British consul in New York, the Nova Scotia-born Edward Archibald, that his daughter began to fear for his life. Even the Dublin Metropolitan Police got in on the act,

² Deposition by Eugene Smith, “Dublin Special Commission, April 1867,” Fenian Briefs, Box 9, no. 6 (a), p. 161, National Archives of Ireland.

³ [Toronto] *Globe*, April 25, 1868.

sending their own spy to New York. He used the code name D. Thomas -- a rather risky choice, since his real name was Thomas Doyle.

Despite all these initiatives, the Canadian authorities were taken completely by surprise when the Fenians invaded from Buffalo in May 1866. In response, the government suspended habeas corpus for one year and, acutely aware of the internal Fenian threat, fortified the Parliamentary and administrative buildings in Ottawa to protect them against “the sudden introduction of explosive preparations.”⁴ After Confederation, rumours of a second invasion prompted the government to renew the suspension of habeas corpus in November 1867, arguing that it would be used only against Fenian invaders. In the event, it was actually employed exclusively against real or suspected Canadian Fenians in the aftermath of McGee’s assassination in April 1868.

The central challenge facing the government was to isolate and disrupt the Canadian Fenian movement without alienating Irish Catholic Canadians in general -- a difficult task given the ambivalence of many Irish Catholics in Canada towards the Fenians, and the anti-Catholic backlash that followed the Fenian raids. McGee’s approach had been to draw a sharp line between the Fenians and Irish Catholic Canadians, and to prevent “hot-headed magistrates”⁵ from over-reacting. After McGee’s assassination, Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald used the suspension of habeas corpus in a highly focused way, drawing on accumulated sources of information and targeting both Fenian leaders and the close associates of Patrick James Whelan. Some Canadians wanted a harder line. In contrast, a vocal minority of Irish Catholics complained that they were all being tarred with the Fenian brush. In an oft-quoted letter to John Hearn, the Ottawa Irish nationalist J.L.P. O’Hanly feared a “sectarian war of extermination” against Catholics after McGee’s assassination. Yet O’Hanly also believed that Macdonald had “acted with moderation, evincing no desire to punish unjustly; and that he deserves great commendation for the manner in which he has throughout resisted the pressure brought to bear on him on the side of persecution.”⁶

In the event, the prisoners arrested under suspension of habeas corpus were released after six months, partly because there was little evidence that they were implicated in McGee’s murder and partly because the government believed that the arrests had effectively destroyed the Fenian movement in Canada. The belief was wrong: the Fenian movement in Canada had indeed been damaged by the assassination and the arrests, but it had not been comprehensively defeated, and its most militant members continued to prepare for the next American invasion. The failure of that invasion, at the Battle of Eccles Hill in 1870, signaled the collapse of the Fenian movement in Canada. Henceforth, Irish Canadian nationalism, in both its revolutionary and constitutional forms, would be focused directly on Ireland.

⁴ Gilbert McMicken, Memorandum, April 30, 1868, Library and Archives Canada, RG13A-2, vol. 20, file 508.

⁵ *Canadian Freeman*, September 20, 1866.

⁶ J.L.P. O’Hanly to John Hearn, May 4, 1868, O’Hanley [sic] Papers, Library and Archives Canada, MG29 B11.